

THE GAY HISTORY SERIES – Lesson #9

The Beast With Five Fingers Big Bill Tilden (1946)

William Tatem Tilden II (February 10, 1893-June 5, 1953), nicknamed “Big Bill”, was 6 feet 2 inches tall and weighed 175 lbs. He is often considered one of the greatest tennis players of all time. An American who was the World No. 1 player for seven years, he won 14 majors including ten Grand Slams and four Pro Slams. Bill Tilden dominated the world of international tennis in the first half of the 1920s. During his 18 year amateur period of 1912-30, he won 138 of 192 tournaments, and had a match record of 907-62, a winning percentage of 93.6 percent.

Now, if he could just have kept his hands out of little boys’ pants...

Tilden was born into a wealthy but very weird Philadelphia family. His mother ran the show at home and his father was kind of just, you know, around. He died when Tilden was 22; no one seems to have noticed. Tilden took up tennis at the age of five. His mother was apparently From Hell and spent most of Tilden’s childhood dressing him and treating him like a girl, even calling him “June” until he was 18 years old. According to one biographer, Tilden spent all of his adult life “attempting to create a father-son relationship with a long succession of ball boys [sic] and youthful tennis protégés, of whom Vinnie Richards was the most noted.”

Tilden never married and lived with his mother until 1941 when he was 48 years old, so you couldn’t say the warning signs weren’t there. Mom did keep him on a fairly tight leash though; it was only after she died and Big Bill moved to Hollywood that he started getting into public trouble.

To quote Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon II*: “Though a whiz on the court, Big Bill was so painfully, pathologically shy (weirded out by Mother) that he never stripped in the locker room or shower. He usually did not shower after a fast-and-furious game. His B.O. was legendary; the rank goats leaping from Tilden’s armpits were enough to make women faint at a distance of fifty feet. If he had any best friends, they didn’t tell him.”

On one interesting note, although Tilden almost never drank, he smoked heavily and disdained what today would be considered a healthy life style for an athlete. For most of his life his diet consisted of three enormous meals a day of steak and potatoes, with, perhaps, the occasional lamb chop. He also appeared in Universal’s sports reels shorts and made several early movies of the “How to Play Tennis: Tips from Big Bill” variety, thus anticipating sports flicks and Jane Fonda’s workout, etc. In the 1940s he appeared in a stage version of *Dracula*, playing the title role.

Tilden’s perversion was apparently one of those open secrets that abound in Hollywood, where he moved after his mother’s death. His molestation of ball boys and other juveniles was so well known that the Russian author Vladimir Nabokov included the character Ned Litam – “Ma Tilden” spelled backwards - in his novel of hetero child molestation, *Lolita*. Tilden’s ghastly secret practices were discreetly overlooked while he was winning tournaments, but in his old age, he got careless and discovered that things are different when one is no longer bankable.

Okay, now comes the gross and filthy part. How can I put this? Apparently, life with Mother had rendered Tilden psychologically impotent, so he substituted with what might be called a hands-on approach. He liked to abduct or lure young boys into isolated situations and...hmmm...diddle their digits, shall we say? You get the idea.

Once again, don’t ask me why a man with wealth, fame, mastery of his sport and public admiration would throw everything he had away for whatever sick, bizarre, and very transitory pleasure or gratification he got from this kind of thing. Even back then, celebrities could get away with almost anything - except that. It’s beyond me, except that I repeat, homosexuality is a form of mental illness which contains a very heavy element of self-destructive impulse.

On November 23, 1946, Tilden was arrested on Sunset Boulevard and charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor for soliciting a 14 year old boy with whom he was having sex in a moving vehicle. Apparently some peculiar law in California made this kind of thing worse if it was a moving violation, so to speak. Because of his vanity he did not carry his glasses with him, and he says he signed a confession without reading it, a Hollywood defense that rings kind of true. In court he defended his actions as "harmless horseplay." The judge disagreed. Tilden was sentenced to a year in prison, but served 7½ months in an "honor camp." His five year parole conditions were so strict they virtually erased all his income that he earned from private lessons, and of course any further tennis tips, films or cameo appearances in Groucho Marx comedies were out of the question. (The Hayes Commission was still keeping a tight rein on the Jews who ran Hollywood).

But like most paedophiles, Tilden just couldn't stop. He was arrested again in January 1949, after picking up a 16 year old hitchhiker who remained anonymous he filed a lawsuit claiming he had suffered severe mental, physical and emotional damage from the encounter. The judge sentenced Tilden to a year on probation violation, and let the punishment for the charge run concurrently. Tilden served another ten months, this time in a road camp.

In both cases, apparently, he believed sincerely that his celebrity and his longtime friendship with Hollywood names such as Charlie Chaplin and Tallulah Bankhead were enough to keep him out of jail. Therefore he defended himself in court in both cases in a far less than vigorous fashion. Oops.

After his second stretch, Tilden was unable to give lessons at most clubs, and even on public courts he had fewer clients. At one point he was invited to play at a prestigious professional tournament being held at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel; at the last moment he was told that he was banned. Chaplin allowed Tilden to use his private court for lessons to help him after the run of legal and financial problems. Having been accused and tried for the rape of a (female) minor himself, Chaplin was probably sympathetic.

Tilden died in poverty in 1953.